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THE WHEEL
Three Poetic Plays on Greek Subjects

BY

LAURENCE HOUSMAN

Samuel French: Publisher
28-30 West Thirty-eighth St.: New York
PRICE TWENTY-SEVEN CENTS

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JUN -3 1920

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I

APOLLO IN HADES

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

HADES.		APOLLO.	
THANATOS.		AN ELDER,	
CLOTHO,	} *Fates*	TIRESIAS.	} *Shades.*
LACHESIS,		A YOUTH,	
ATROPOS,		A NEWCOMER,	

Chorus of Shades.

THE WHEEL

APOLLO IN HADES

(*A hall of black pillars, supporting a roof of solid stone. The stage opens dark. In the dimness* HADES *sits enthroned. Pale blue lightnings flash now and again upon his face as he speaks. A deep vibration fills the air.*)

HADES. Hades, among the dead, sole God am I.
On earth men wither, and wax weak, and die,
Pass forth, and are forgotten. But my realm,
To whose dark borders Charon sets his helm,
Keeps safe its myriad thralls. Unto my hand
The sea of life hath washed them, as the sand
Washed to the shore lies strewn, a barren waste
Immeasurable. Time goeth without haste,
Night without day, for ever. King am I
Of an unborn people which still multiply,
Bringing my godhead strength. For lo, this breath
Of wind which bloweth about me is from the death
Of mortal men; I gather from their lips
My draught of life, and under their eclipse
My rolling world moves on.
To the Lord of Day
Men yield their strength, and in my timeless sway
No holier power discern,—till here they come.
But in my Kingdom sorrow and joy are dumb,

(Things without sense to men that have no need);
And wrath, and jealousy, and fear, that breed
In the day's light, are ended. To and fro
Phoebus Apollo travelleth, working woe
For all that trust in him. But my sure throne
Stays fixed eternally, and peace alone
Dwells with the dead. So for the avertless doom
Of life's vain followers—the feet of whom
Like roots I pluck from earth—round their brief years,
Within my realm I have set ministers,
To work the unchanging Will. Grey Sisters three,
Blindly they weave the web of destiny
For the lives they know not, and without love or hate
Mete out their span of days. For this is Fate;
And none shall make it other.

Enter THANATOS.

Who goes there?

THANATOS. Thy servant, Death.

HADES. Whither?

THANATOS. Up yonder, where
Thy dead men cry for me.

HADES. Whence art thou come?

THANATOS. From Those men name not. Yonder canst hear the hum
Of that great Wheel where the world's mortal coil
Speeds to its end.

HADES. But ends not.
THANATOS. Nor my toil.
Thy bidding, Lord?
HADES. Go! get thee gone, and do
The Will that sends thee!
THANATOS. And fill up anew
This world of shades.
HADES. Where, without end, I reign.

[*Darkness closes, covering* HADES *and the throne from view. In its place presently appears the stairway leading to the upper world.*

THANATOS. So, lest he chide, I must be swift again
And fetch him fodder! Ah, thou nimble light,
I love thee not! Better I work by night
Than e'er by day.

[*In a pillared recess to the right of the stairway appear the Three Fates, plying their task.* CLOTHO *turns her wheel;* LACHESIS *draws out the thread and gathers it into a skein of varying lengths.* ATROPOS *with her shears cuts it through.*

THANATOS. Grey Sisters, is it your will
That I go now?
[LACHESIS *flings him the shorn skein.*
Ah, ha! I get my fill
Of good things sometimes! Oh, how many a life
Lies shattered here,—youth, maiden, man, and wife,

Greybeard, and child! Closely within one knot
I'll tie them fast. Souls keep when bodies rot!

[*Laughing he goes up the stair. As he goes the Shade of a* YOUTH, *hitherto unobserved reclining against a pillar, moves forward and watches him. For a moment the faint ray of light which illumines the stair increases, as though a door at the far end had been opened. A note of song is heard: then a door bangs, and settled darkness returns again.*

CLOTHO. Sisters, that task is done,
And another has begun.
So must life run,
Till the world behold no sun.
LACHESIS. Till the day when man saith,
Being born, 'I am quit of breath!"
Till he cry unto Life and Death
'Ye are one!' as he perisheth.
ATROPOS. Yea, until men shall say,
'Death is Life; Night is Day';—
Then is it time to lay
Distaff and shears away.
CLOTHO. Sisters, the word is said:
When the feet of the lame go sped,
And the fruitful forget to wed,
Time will have dug his bed.
ALL THREE. We toil till the world is dead.

[*Darkness, like a wall, closes over them; they disappear.*

Enter CHORUS *of* SHADES.

CHORUS. The sound of the Wheel: 'tis ever the same,—
They at their labour; we at our rest.
To this world empty of hand I came,
And surely my feet, as they passed, were slow,
And the life they had left seemed best.
But now have I seen, and know
That the feet which journey no more are blest,
And the hands which empty remain.
Nay, why should I fill them again
With care and a weight of woe?
For, having tasted the cup,
No longer do I fear death:
But bitter my thirst, and sore
When the draught to give up
Was breath.

A YOUTH. Since when have I seen a flower
Arise, and blossom, and fade;
Or heaven, at the twilight hour,
Cover earth with her shade?
Since when have I looked on bliss,
The brief-comer, and been afraid?

AN ELDER. What need to reckon of time,
Where day and night are forgotten?
Can flower find root in the clime
Of the unborn, the unbegotten?
Wherefore dost thou ask this?
Of what hope hast thou been betrayed?

YOUTH. Only a little thing:
A moment yon door stood wide,
And a far-off beam of light

Stole in, and died
In the gloom.
And memory came and cried;
For I heard a strange bird sing
From the world that was once my tomb.

ELDER. Content thee, brother, afresh!
Surely 'tis nothing to thee.
Would thy spirit again wear flesh?
Wouldst thou long for what shall not be?
Was prayer not a weariness:
Was the answer so sure?
Reach, and embrace thy doom,
And keep peace; for that shall endure.

1ST SHADE. Lo, yonder, Charon's barge hath touched the strand.

2ND SHADE. See the new Shades, uncertain as they land
Whither to turn!

1ST SHADE. For they know nothing yet
Of this mute world whereto their sun hath set.

2ND SHADE. See, they are approaching!

Enter SHADES.

YOUTH. [*To one carrying a withered spray.*]
Thou art a newcomer:
What dost thou remember?
What, in thy hand, is
This thing thou holdest?

NEWCOMER. Ask not, for I know not!
Lately I have drunk sweetness
In deep-flowing Lethe.

That draught was painless,
Restful, and sufficient.

[*He lets fall the spray, and passes.*

ELDER. [*To* YOUTH.]
Why wouldst thou probe the past? What is thy quest?

YOUTH. I heard a bird!

ELDER. Hast thou not drunk of Lethe, and found rest?

SHADE. Tell me, for I am a stranger; here I see
Faces, yet none I know. Who shall these be?

ELDER. Shades of the Dead.

SHADE. And yon man, with a face
More living than the rest, and in his hand
Bearing a golden rod?

ELDER. Tiresias.
Blind, he still sees; the woe he bore on earth
Afflicts him yet; and power to prophesy
Holds him from peace.

SHADE. Tells he the things he knows?

ELDER. He may: we heed not. Rumour runs not here.
For in this world, things hidden, or things foretold,
Concern us not.

SHADE. Yet one thing would I learn!

TIRESIAS. I know thy mind. Seek not, for it is vain.
Look no more backward now; no profit dwells
In lives outworn. Men wither till they die,
Then fixed remain for ever. But forward still,

Affronting these blank orbs, the world wheels on:
It rests not yet. And we, like shadows with it,
Are slowly borne to ends which have no end—
That lips may utter.

[*He sits and remains fixed in deep meditation.*

ELDER. The oracle hath ceased, and sleeps again.
Break not his slumber!
SHADE. Nay, but he lifts his head.
Blind man, what dost thou see?
TIRESIAS. I hear the tread
Of one that runneth—swiftly.
SHADE. I listen in vain.
TIRESIAS. Into this underworld now cometh pain,
Grief and calamity. Oh, unlooked-for woe!
ELDER. Sayest thou so?
Thou'rt an uneasy sleeper; sleep again!
1ST SEMI-CHORUS. Doth not this gift of dreams
Bring peace to thy mind
And rest?
For the thing which only seems,
If it seems to be so, is best.
What better reward shalt thou find
Wherewith in thy day to be blest?
2ND SEMI-CHORUS. For, surely, here without end
I shall dwell in a world of dreams,
Hearing the ripple and flow
Of shrunken and vanished streams;
For hither from Earth descend
The ghosts of her years that go:—
The shadows of sunlit hours,

The scent of the fallen flowers,
The lowing of dead herds,
And the hushed warble of birds.
So, evermore, be it mine,
Untroubled of heart to dwell
Where all that had life sleep well
In the garden of Proserpine.

SHADE. [*to* TIRESIAS]. Why dost thou stand and wait, and watch, blindly at yon closed portal?

[*A clash of cymbals is heard, and a voice singing.*

VOICE. Unbar ye doors! Uplift ye gates! I am the Life Immortal!

1ST SEMI-CHORUS. What marvel is this,—
And that brings what word?

2ND SEMI-CHORUS. 'Tis a voice that sings
To a sound of strings!

YOUTH. 'Tis the voice I heard!

CHORUS. The voice he heard!
And swiftly it cometh on shining wings!

[*A sound of opening doors; the stairway to the upper world is flooded with light. String-music grows louder, joyous and full of triumph.*

APOLLO [*without*]. Awake, arise, ye Dead, and look on Day!

TIRESIAS. A double death is yours, if ye obey!

APOLLO. [*without*]. I am Apollo! Turn, and look on me!

[APOLLO *appears descending the stairs; he bears a harp, and at his girdle a wine-skin and a cup of gold.*

CHORUS. He cometh with bow and with quiver!
TIRESIAS. Woe to the ears that hear, the eyes that see!
CHORUS. What word, what word to deliver?
APOLLO. To lowest Hell the beams of Heaven I bring.
CHORUS. The beams of Heaven, yea, the beams!
TIRESIAS. Ye are destroyed, if ye behold this thing!
CHORUS. We behold; but no longer in dreams!
APOLLO. With shafts of light I shatter the bars of Hell.
CHORUS. His shafts have shattered the bars!
TIRESIAS. O place of peace, now made most miserable!
CHORUS. And lo, the Heavens, and the stars,
And the hills with their crowns of snow,
Made bright by the sun!
TIRESIAS. It is finished and done;
And there cometh woe upon woe!

[*The* SHADES *gather; they stand entranced and hang eagerly upon* APOLLO'S *words.*

APOLLO. [*Speaking to music*].
Hearken to me, Apollo,
Lord of the Bow and the Quiver!
CHORUS. We hear, and we wait to follow,
O God, strong to deliver!
APOLLO. Lo, where the dark way narrows,
I, upon bended bow,
Smote me a path with mine arrows
Down to the Shades below.
CHORUS. And from the bonds that bound us,

And the tomb wherein thou hast found us,
Mighty thou comest to save!

TIRESIAS. One man's soul from the grave,
And to bring us to woe!

APOLLO. Gracious of heart have men found me,
Who worshipped the work of my hands.
Happy the cities that crowned me.
And happy the lands.
Have ye heard how I builded Troy,
Whose name shall be known for ever?

TIRESIAS. Yea, but for grief, not for joy:
It shall fall; it shall rise again never!

APOLLO Who is he, speaketh with a froward mind?

TIRESIAS. I am Tiresias, whom the gods made blind.

APOLLO. Tiresias?

TIRESIAS. Yea.

APOLLO. Art thou a prophet still?

TIRESIAS. With all the griefs to come my cup I fill.

APOLLO. And the joys also?

TIRESIAS. Reach thy guiding hand,
And lead where I may find that looked-for land!

APOLLO. Rich joys are in this vintage which I bear.

TIRESIAS. Thy draughts are mixed, the dregs thereof despair.

APOLLO. Not for thy lips this cup; so be at rest!

TIRESIAS. Yet shall it spill, and the unbidden guest
Shall drink thereof, and, wailing, curse the day.

APOLLO. Falsehood is on thy tongue! Bear him away!

[*The* SHADES *close in and cover* TIRESIAS *from view.* APOLLO *seats himself.*

CHORUS. Apollo, Apollo, thou comest
With power to deliver!
Before I prayed thou hast promised,
All-mighty, All-giver!

APOLLO. Hearken, ye Shades! Because in the griefs of earth,
And faithfulness between the doors of birth
And death, which close dividing man from man,
And bonds of love, enduring through the span
Of life's brief years;—because, in those dim ways,
Some trace I found of the celestial rays
Which earthward fall from Heaven, now am I come
On wings of healing to fulfil the sum
Of one man's heart's desire. For I, his friend
(He knowing not the God), unto this end
Have set my feet for service.
It shall be told
In days hereafter, how by flock and fold
Nine years I toiled, banished from my high place
For stain of blood. The glory from my face
I put away, and mortals knew me not.
Yet was this man my friend; he made my lot
Pleasant for me. And, shepherd to this king,
Friendship I found to be a holier thing
Than Heaven had taught me. So, when my task was done,
And up from earth I passed, a risen sun
Renewed in splendour, unto this man I gave
To ask one boon. And he: 'Let not the grave
Take me before my time,—till I be old!'
But not in the courts of Heaven can it be told
When man shall die, nor how long he may live.
So was that prize not in my hand to give,—

Yet in my will to win. And for this end
Hither am I come, wholly to save my friend
Who trusted me. So by these doors I wait
To lay high hands of blessing upon his fate.

TIRESIAS [*emerging from the throng*].

And lo, thy blessing shall become a curse;
And Death shall take the better for the worse!

[*As the* SHADES *again close round him, the Hall of the Fates once more stands revealed.*

APOLLO. Where are ye, ye Grey Sisters?

ELDER. Lo, they stand
Yonder to do thy bidding.

[APOLLO *takes the cup from his girdle, unslings the wine-skin and pours out wine.*

SHADE. God, in thy hand
What is that cup thou holdest?

APOLLO. 'Tis a wine
Which whoso drinketh, he becometh mine,
Worshipping at my throne.
Strange, Sisters, is your toil in this far place.

ATROPOS. Yea, strange to many; but more strange thy face
Among the dead. Wherefore art thou come here?

APOLLO. To gaze on these grey Forms which all men fear.

ATROPOS. Weighs there no fear of Heaven on mortal breath?

APOLLO. Aye, many fear us; but more men fear death.

ATROPOS. To thee, the All-giver, do men pray in vain?

APOLLO. Nay, many have I upraised, and many slain.

ATROPOS. We saw thy slain; but those whom thou hast raised,
We know not, nor by the dead have heard thee praised.

APOLLO. My praise is on the lips of living men.

ATROPOS. Yea, till they die: they are forgetful then.

APOLLO. Having drunk Lethe.

ATROPOS. Therefore, O thou young Star,
Brief is thy reign: more strong those waters are
Than any wine.

APOLLO. Yet to your lips I bring
A cup, which ye shall taste with thanksgiving,
And keep in mind for ever.

ATROPOS. Pour it away!
Give me no vintage warm from the breath of day.

APOLLO. Cool is this draught, yet doth it kindle fire.
Here when men drink they find their heart's desire;
And love of fame or power passes like breath,
Shame they forget; even the fear of death
Holds them no more.

ATROPOS. The fear of death? How so?

APOLLO. For he that tastes this vintage letteth go
The sight of his own eyes: straightway he sees
As the Gods see in Heaven; and from their knees
Looks down on little earth where he was born;
And wheel, and web, and shears, he holds in scorn.
In that brief moment he hath lived his days;
And howsoever, then, dark fortune sways,—

Fate's but a flea-bite.

ATROPOS. Let me taste this wine!

APOLLO. But ye must share it.

ATROPOS. All things that I make mine
Are hers, and hers.

APOLLO. So be it! No drop shall spill.
Hither reach hand, and take, and drink your fill!

[ATROPOS *takes the cup, drinks, and passes it to her Sisters, who drink each in turn.*

ATROPOS. Yea, now have I quaffed.

LACHESIS. I have drunk a deep draught.

CLOTHO. As I drank, the cup laughed.

[APOLLO *strikes upon his harp*

LACHESIS. What is here, O my soul?

ATROPOS. There was music in that bowl.

CLOTHO. A sound as of bells that toll.

[APOLLO *strikes again*

ATROPOS. Yea, and I heard them sing,

LACHESIS. How the Earth is a green thing,

CLOTHO. A place whence rivers spring.

[*She rises and speaks more swiftly.* APOLLO'S *harp strikes accompaniment.*

Hark! I hear a noise of rills
And of torrents falling;
There are murmurs in the valleys,
There are voices in the hills.
'Tis the Naiads, who are calling
From their crannies in the rocks,
And the pools where the water spills.
But they heed not, nor hearken
As the flying echo mocks;

And out from a cleft there sallies
A young stream dancing for glee,
With leaping feet, and with laughter,
Crying, 'I am free, I am free!'
And long bright locks flowing after,
As she dances down to the sea!

LACHESIS. In the woods, when the Dryad wakes,
There under the green of the boughs,
Lurking with hornéd brows,
Young Faun hath she seen.
He reaches his hand, he takes,
Holding her fast by the hair;
And there comes a shower of leaves,
As a sharp wind lifts and heaves;
But she leaps and the long bough breaks,
And the place where he hid lies bare.

ATROPOS. From the day's long heat,
And the drought of noon,
To a land smitten with fire,
Com'st thou not soon,
O my Lord, on swift feet,
To feast at thy heart's desire?
Ah! what is this thou hast done?
What binding in bonds, without shape?
She fears thee, but cannot escape;
And her feet may not run;
And her eyes may not see, being blind.
Take her, O Holy One,
Take her, and gather, and bind!
Let her be as a grape
To thy treading, as grain to thy flail,
Ere she fail, and be brought to the grave;
Ere she comes to the brink
Of the waters of Lethe, and sink,
And be lost in that wave!

[*The chant ceases; she speaks.*

Give me more of this drink.

[APOLLO *refills the cup, and hands it.*

APOLLO. Take and drink all of it! For this
Is Life eternal, and brings bliss!

[*The* FATES *drink: they are seized with ecstasy, and speak in chorus.*

FATES. Faster, faster,
O God Apollo,
O Lord and Master
Guide me, and lead me!
Wheresoe'er thou goest,
My feet shall follow,
The way thou showest
Shall be my way also.
If thou dost need me,
Break me to thy will, and bend me!
Yea, let thy ministers,
Thy lovers which attend thee,
Take at my hand for a gift
Whatsoe'er thou seekest!
Out of the mire I will lift
The woeful of heart, the weakest:
I will break the power of the strong,
And confound the way of the wisest;
I will save the soul thou prizest,
Making his brief days long.
The life, which is my giving,
Shall return to the land of the living!

[*The* SHADES *utter a cry of joy.*

APOLLO. Bear witness, O ye Dead, and stand by me!
What Fate hath promised now shall Fate decree.

CHORUS. For now the word hath been spoken,
And the bonds of Hell shall be broken!

[*The* FATES *are themselves again.*

ATROPOS. What have I said?
CLOTHO. What word, heard of the Dead,
LACHESIS. Out of my lips hath sped?
APOLLO. To his young soul, whom hither I came to save,
Your word hath wrought deliverance from the grave.
CLOTHO. Nay, for that may not be.
ATROPOS. No thread of life breaks free.
LACHESIS. What manner of man is he?
APOLLO. Admetus, Lord of Pherae, and my friend.
CLOTHO. Lo, here his web I spin.
ATROPOS. His life shall end To-morrow.
LACHESIS. And no hand can change that doom.
APOLLO. It is thy hand which gives him to the tomb.
ATROPOS. A life is a life still:
CLOTHO. We do the unchanging Will,
LACHESIS. And doom upon doom fulfil.
APOLLO. May not another die and take his place?
ATROPOS. Go thou, and ask if any of mortal race Will die to save another!
APOLLO. If so it be That I find—one?
ATROPOS. Aye! Then shall he go free:
So number we our dead, of whose amount
To Hades, holy and high, the strict account
Stands due.
APOLLO. Well said! I hold thee to that bond;
For with immortal eyes I see beyond
This moment of man's breath, and I discern
That in his house dwells one whose love shall turn
Destruction from his path. She, in his stead,

Hither shall come, and dwell among the dead.
ATROPOS. This, dost thou promise?
APOLLO. Yea, by this Form of light
I swear it.
ATROPOS. So thou givest to us our right,
Him do we yield. Take: with this thread unshorn,
Bind fast the life of him thou wouldst not mourn.
APOLLO. It is enough. Hades, thou hidden God,
Let this thing stand confirmèd by thy nod.
[*A roll of thunder is heard. The cave of the* FATES *disappears.*
Hear, O ye Dead! A God smote with his breath,
And in this place, dividing life from death,
Succoured his friend: which life I bear away
Safe in my bosom to the realm of day.
Farewell!
[*The* SHADES *move in troubled astonishment.*
To those which come hereafter, ye shall tell
How, on a day, down to the depth of Hell
Song sounded, and there sprang a shaft of light
That struck its way, and, conquering Death and Night,
One man less mortal made.
But now my bright beams call me, and I go
Lightly away to the hills of stainless snow,
And the far heights of Heaven; and here below
Ye'll see my face no more. Yet have ye been
Beholders of a marvel—having seen
My light and glory—and with dead ears have heard
The sounded music of the Eternal Word.
[APOLLO *turns and goes up the stair, playing upon his harp as he goes. The light of*

his presence fades and disappears; his harp is no longer heard. There comes the dull clang of a closing door. Hell is left desolate. The SHADES, *having watched the God's departure with straining eyes, remain motionless, all gazing the same way. There follows a long pause. Presently they turn and look at each other in open-mouthed wonder and grief. Through their midst, with dazed face, totters an* ELDER: *he stumbles, pauses, then speaks.*

ELDER. I stumble, and my feet falter,
And, for fear, stir not again.
Brothers, what shall be said
Of this deed I have done?
For here is one lieth dead
Who worshipped our Lord, the Sun.
And ye see how my hands drip red
With the life of the victim slain!
Tell me, at what dark altar,
Have we taken God's name in vain?

SHADES. Apollo, Apollo, Apollo!
Have we called thee in vain?

YOUTH. I heard a bird that sung;
And gold were the wings it spread.
And lo, as it came, there sprung
A hope in the heart of the dead:
Till I saw a vulture thrust forth his head,
And the claws of a bird of prey;
And a morsel of flesh that hung,
As the red beak bore it away!

SHADES. Apollo, Apollo!
Cam'st thou in vain?

1ST SEMI-CHORUS. His arrow of light he drew
As a shaft from its sheath,—

Loosed it, and forth it flew,
And pierced to the world beneath:

2ND SEMI-CHORUS. And bodies which held no breath,
And eyes which beheld no light,
He delivered to second death,
And to endless night!

CHORUS. Curse ye, curse ye, the song of the Bird,
And the place where his wings have been!
Cursed be the ears which heard,
And the eyes which have seen!

TIRESIAS. Peace! It is over and done;
Now there remaineth a rest.
Henceforth ye shall see no sun,
No moon, and no star.
But there cometh one from afar,—
A Queen, yea more than a Queen,
Whose name and whose goings are blest.
Hither she cometh of her own choice,
Her years were brief, and their end was grief,
Yet with death hath she crowned her days:
There is wisdom in all her ways,
And comfort for them that hear her voice.

ELDER. Why should I hearken again?
To what voice? What tidings to know?
By a light in my soul I was slain,
And the song of a bird brought woe.
O God, these empty hands!
And these feet that no longer run!
And these blinded eyes where a vision stands,
Black from the light of the Sun!
A God smote with his heel;
We prayed, but lo, he was gone.
What altar remains where the dead may kneel?
Yonder I hear the hum of the Wheel,
And my doom runneth on.

THE DEATH OF ALCESTIS

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

PROSERPINE. ALCESTIS.
HERMES. TIRESIAS.
VOICES OF FURIES. SHADES.
CHORUS OF SHADES.

(*The garden of* PROSPERPINE *lies under a great wall of rock which fills the entire background except where an ascending way goes up to the right. In the centre, raised above the ground, is a deep cleft from which falls without sound a thin stream of water. The rock's base is thickly set with poppies and asphodels, among which the* SHADES *sit or crouch. Others stand, motionless and apart, with bowed heads, holding hands. To right and left larger groups stand spectant; no head is raised.* TIRESIAS, *seated upon a rock beside the stream, and surrounded by recumbent forms, lifts and speaks.*)

TIRESIAS. Garden of Proserpine, that without breath,
Or beam of travelling light, pours to my brain
Scent of dead flowers, and to mine inward ear
The murmur of waters from Earth's withered streams,—
Deep bed of slumber, where the most holy Feet
Bring in their train faint semblances of spring,
Dim forms which change not, yet in sleep seem fair,—
Now soon she cometh like a moon to rest,
With downward sloping beam, and in her arms
Ghosts of the young dead year, sun-shattered flowers
From Enna's fields, where for last look she turned.
And lo, here also she shall find his dead,
Pierced and sore-stricken, having no will to rise

And gaze again on the once looked-for Face,
When to black night and the dark nuptial bower
She sinks her splendour.

1ST SHADE. Who is he that speaks?

2ND SHADE. Tiresias, the blind.

1ST SHADE. Surely his lot
In Hell, the saddest once, proves happiest now;
For what we lost he saw not!

[*He rises with a gesture of despair.*

2ND SHADE. Brother, let be!
Call not to mind the grief
Which no tongue can mend:
Strain not thine eyes for an end
They would weep to see!

1ST SHADE. No tears are left me to shed,
For the Sun's light drank them dry.
My heart stays empty and dead,
The husk of a withered hope;
In the grave where the blind feet grope,
Seeking a place to lie,
I wander uncomforted.

[*He moves slowly away.*

3RD SHADE. How long must I hold in mind
That vision, golden and fair?
He came; and for joy I was blind:
I looked; and he was not there.

CHORUS. Hear us, O ye deaf ears!
Hither, O feet, once swift!
O voice of the dawn when daylight appears,
Restore us the gift!

3RD SHADE. See, yonder there cometh a throng.

2ND SHADE. The shades of the newly dead.

3RD SHADE. And the grief and the wrong
We bear, mean nothing to these;
Because, as they crossed its flow,

They drank of the river of peace,
And their hearts were cleansed from woe.

1ST SHADE. Ah! might I arise and go
Back hence, on returning feet,
And come again to the brink
Of Lethe, and stoop there and drink,—
How the draught would be sweet!

CHORUS. Hear us, O Lord of Light!
Hither on healing wings:
Take from a people which walk in night
This vision which stings!

Enter SHADES *of the newly Dead.*

NEW SHADES. Ye Shades, why stand ye gazing
Yonder, where shines no heaven?
What see ye, or what seek ye,
Above, in the thick darkness?
Tell us, for here we are strangers,
What worship is this ye render?

CHORUS. He came: over the darkness
He spake, and our ears heard him;
We beheld, and lo, he was by us;
We prayed, and lo, he was with us;
We knelt, salvation was nigh us;
The Fates trembled and feared him.

1ST SEMI-CHORUS. With worshipping hands we raised him
Hearts that were fain to adore;
Sweet to his ears we praised him,
And the life he came to restore.

2ND SEMI-CHORUS. Ah, speak not of that! But tell
Of the end which befell!

IST SEMI-CHORUS. Nay, had we not this for a showing
Of his fame, and power of his might?
Like the day-spring on high he came.
2ND SEMI-CHORUS. His going—brought night!
IST SEMI-CHORUS. From the speed of his feet he shook
The dust of our souls, and took
The light of his glory that shone from us.
2ND SEMI-CHORUS. And the darkness became as a wall,
As upward to earth he bore
The one soul saved out of all.
We looked, but lo, he was gone from us!
And the place knew him no more.
CHORUS. Ah, God, who dwellest in light,
How came this thing to be done
Not in the darkness, or the dead of night,
But in sight of the Sun?
Woe, woe!
It was done! It was done!
[*They bow down with covered faces.*
NEW SHADES. Holds Hell such grief?
And is Death so robbed of his worth,
That the weight of the hand of Heaven
Lies under the Earth?
Woe, woe! for my peace is now ended,
My sorrow begun! [*They cover their faces.*
TIRESIAS. Moon of the Dead, whose coming brings anew
A light in sorrow to this dark underworld,
From yonder steepling rock I hear thy feet
Move like a downward water; and the peace
Of thy pure presence, which like some softer air

Folds thee about, hath touched me, and I grow dumb.

[*While he speaks, in the cleft of the rock, a dim light begins mysteriously to burn; its radiance gradually increases. Presently in the midst of it* PROSERPINE *appears, her head crowned, and her hands laden with flowers.*

PROSERPINE. Earth, Mother, first one word upward to Thee
Far off, I send:
Mourn not that I am gone!
For of my being that life thou once didst tend
Was but a part:
Thy godhead, mothering mine,
Hath struck strange roots, deep in the inmost heart.
Upon dead eyes I shine;
And from this underworld look out on stars
And constellations, hidden from mortal ken.
Yea, and not Zeus, nor Hera, on Heaven's throne,
Hath seen what I have seen among dead men,
Or known what I have known.
When darkness deepens and thick night comes on,
I feel no fears. To me all things are blest:
Life, Birth, and Death, these with an equal hand
I keep and cherish.
And now the fields have rest;
Sleep lies in every cup of flower or land,
Night with her sleeping-draught hath locked each breast:
I only wake. And with me cometh a wonder;
For I, that strawed, have reaped and gathered sheaves:

From Earth's brief years I sunder
(Hear, O ye Dead!)
Life that loves death, lost joy that no more grieves,
And light of eyes which shone to shine no more.
These to black night and the dark bridal bed
I bring, and strew them at my bridegroom's door!
Hades, O Lord of Death,
Into thy hand I resign
My spirit and my breath:
Take me, for I am thine!

[*She stands with arms parted, in an attitude invocation. Suddenly the air becomes full of a noise of rushing wings: the scene darkens, overhead is heard the shrill crying of the* FURIES, *like the scream of seagulls. Now and again they break into wild chantings, which become more and more turbulent and indistinguishable.*

VIOCES OF THE FURIES. Proserpine! Proserpine!
Thou art his; we are thine.
Hades, thou art the God!

O Thou Bride,
He comes to Thy side!
Hades, Thou art the God!

Open thine arms and give!
Thou diest that the world may live.
Hades, Thou art the God!

1ST SHADE. 'Tis the crying of the Furies,
Power upon power attending.
Look, overhead ye can see
Red eyes, and the black wings beating!

2ND SHADE. Hither, thither, they are flying,
Circling, hovering, and bending.
Where shall the prey now be?
What flesh are in the sharp teeth rending?
3RD SHADE. Peace! He cometh: 't is He,
Hades. They give him greeting.

[*There is a roll of thunder. Up from the stream's basin rises a light of fire: the moon-like radiance in which* PROSERPINE *stands becomes changed; the glow deepens; gradually her form sinks and is lost to view. Ground-thunder increases. Lightnings flash; the cleft of rock closes in darkness. While the thunder continues to roll the crying of the* FURIES *dies away.*

1ST SEMI-CHORUS. Under my feet earth shaketh,
And the voice of his thunder rolleth;
The realm of death he controlleth,
His fires have made me afraid.
2ND SEMI-CHORUS. He reacheth his hand. he taketh,
With fierce fires for the womb,
He draweth her down to the tomb.
CHORUS. O Goddess, immortal Maid,
Thou his bride—He, thy groom,
Here, in this place of doom,
Hath covered thy feet with shade.
TIRESIAS. The voice of the thunder is still; peace cometh again.
She sleepeth; her soul is at rest, and she feels no pain.

[*Faintly in the distance the* VOICES *of the* FURIES *are again heard.*

VOICES. Proserpine! Proserpine!
Thou are his; we are thine.
Hades, thou art the God!

1ST SEMI-CHORUS. Night follows day, and setteth
sun and moon,
But here, for thee, Time's changes are no more.
Across the desolate lands thou shalt not see
When Winter's flail shakes soon
The shuddering forest, nor when frost lies frore
On blackened boughs, nor touch the frozen
streams
With softening breath,
Nor with warm hands undo
The close unopened buds of the blind spring.
For thou dost yield thy soul to dreams;
And Death
So holds thee, thou canst hear no song-bird
sing,
Save in thy heart,
The quiet, resting heart,
The deep, unentered heart,
Asleep the long night through.

2ND SEMI-CHORUS. Yet though thy dream be of
Death,
Still thou stayest immortal:
Not to thy face stand fast
The bars of the time-bound portal
Where I stay waiting in vain!
Thy lips shall again taste breath
At the birth of another spring;
And her coming shall cover the past,
And her new year be as the last,
When a flush in the white-thorn starts,
And the thrush or the linnet sing.

CHORUS. Oh, could I see the face
Of one, who for death was fain!
Who had tasted, and wished not again
For one breath of the life that was lost;

But only that summer and spring
And the years which they bring
Might cease!
Surely, then, in this place,
As of old would my soul find peace!

TIRESIAS. Ye Shades, arise, and stand! There cometh a God!

SHADES. [*starting up*] A God? What God?

TIRESIAS. He of the golden rod,
The Herald of the Dead; Hermes, his name.

1ST SHADE. Ah, woe is me! Not the bright Lord of Flame,
The Bearer of the Bow?

TIRESIAS. Unto this land
Gracious he cometh; for now beneath his hand
He bringeth one whose lips have tasted death.
But Lethe's draught—not yet. So shall ye see
In her clear eyes the light of memory,
And from her lips hear words—tidings of earth.

2ND SHADE. So shall I thirst yet more. Ah, me! what worth
Be any tidings now?

TIRESIAS. Cease, cease your wail!

Enter HERMES, *followed by* ALCESTIS. *He moves forward with the caduceus extended backwards. The hand of* ALCESTIS *rests on it. Having arrived he lifts it away: her hand falls; she stands motionless.*

HERMES. Peace to this place of Shades, where bloom the pale
Dream-flowers of Proserpine; and to her rest
Peace also, where she lieth! At Heaven's behest

Hither I come, because to immortal eyes
This soul was blameless, perfect, and pure, and wise
In all her words and ways. Herself she gave
Dying for her lord,—yea, bought him from the grave,
Where now her body lies. Therefore was given
This task to me: I, messenger of Heaven,
Bring hither one whose lips have tasted death,
But Lethe's draught—not yet. For thee alone
Is this ordained, till God's will be made known.
But what dark Fate decrees no tongue shall tell,
Till time bear fruit thereof. Hail, and farewell!
[*Exit* HERMES.

TIRESIAS. Time bears and breaks,
Time yields and takes,
Time mars and makes,
And the years run on.

1ST SHADE. Ye have heard her praised?

2ND SHADE. Yea, immortal breath
This word was uttered: 'She gave herself to death,
That one might live!'

3RD SHADE. How can this marvel be?

1ST SHADE. Think ye she is not dead?

3RD SHADE. Not verily;
She only sleeps.

2ND SHADE. Question: then, if she wake,
Forth like a mist she'll pass, and yonder take
The sunward way!

3RD SHADE. What sign to know thee by,
Sister? If thou be dead, how didst thou die?

[*All this time* ALCESTIS *has remained motionless. Now with a slight gesture she opens her hands as though letting something fall.*

1ST SHADE. Thou hast the eyes of Earth: what dost thou see?

ALCESTIS. Death, as a door to birth, where the soul breaks free!

2ND SHADE. Shall souls be free in a world where all lie bound?

ALCESTIS. Where the dead rest, there, surely, is freedom found.

1ST SHADE. Thou hast come far: art thou content to stay?

ALCESTIS. My feet are weary from the downward way.

3RD SHADE. Turned not thy thoughts from the path thou didst descend?

ALCESTIS. Where should they turn? Here is the traveller's end.

2ND SHADE. For longer life hadst thou no will to stay?

ALCESTIS. Brief life remained when brief life passed away.

1ST SHADE. Was there no sorrow for thee when thou wert dead?

ALCESTIS. Aye, sorrow heaped on sorrow: from that I fled.

3RD SHADE. Was there no friend to wish thee back again?

ALCESTIS. Much he so wished, by whose wish I am slain.

2ND SHADE. Strange are thy words, and who knows what they mean?

ALCESTIS. For strange is life, when the grave stands between.

1ST SHADE. Tell us thereof!

ALCESTIS. What seeking, would ye know?

1ST SHADE. Life thou beholdest; yet hath thy soul let go
The heart's desire thereof. That is most strange!
ALCESTIS. Must not all things which taste of time learn change?
Hearken to me! Between two worlds I dwell:
Life I now know, having known death as well.
So from deep night one looks upon a star;
Yea, and it shines, but round its rays stretch far
Dark regions, and the undiscovered skies.
Such is man's life: the heavens are full of eyes,
But round them spreadeth darkness, and beyond,—
He knoweth not what.
And this truth having conned,
Surely I learned how, for brief life, 'twere well
Within one Being to rest inseparable;
And as the stars lie in the hand of Night,
Which takes and turns them, severing light from light,
And moon from sun and day, even so do we
Lie in the Hand of that Infinity
Whose shape is round us. Light fails as it flies,
But where it travels not, there darkness lies
For ever. Ye Shades, this rest, which ye now share,
Is but a showing of that which Life shall bear
Hereafter unto Death: here ye behold
Dimly that peace which cometh to enfold
All things made equal,—yes, both Gods and men!
TIRESIAS. This that thou tellest lieth beyond my ken.
Would God, it were so!
ALCESTIS. Surely, the day shall be.

So came the hour, when sorrow fell on me
That I must die. Then saw I that the hand
Which once I leaned on helped me not to stand,
Nor brought salvation—because men fear Death.
Whom when I feared no more, then forth like breath
Spirit from body parted—but stayed near,
And saw them lay her body upon the bier,
And bear it forth unto a place of shade
Where grew tall cypresses; and there they laid
That form corruptible.
Then Death made bare
His blade (I saw him), and one lock of hair
Severed; and at his touch the flesh grew clay;
Wherefrom not loath, quickly I turned away.
Then Hermes I beheld, and by the hand
Of that bright God unto an unknown land
I came: and I am here.

SHADE. Lo, as a falling water, thy voice to mine ear
Brings comfort again. We are dead; whom, then, shall we fear?

SEMI-CHORUS. As the beds of the brooks,
When withered by heat,
Lie fainting for streams
Of the hill-waters sweet,
So I sought for thy looks,
So I longed for thy feet.

[TIRESIAS *rises and speaks in vision.*

TIRESIAS. Under the rock,
By the place of tombs,
In the shade of the cypresses, he stands;
And round the dark blade the bright shorn lock
He bindeth with eager hands.
Now he hath taken the toll,
And hath torn body from soul,

His task is done: let him go!
But he stoops to the meats which the mourners bring,
And drinks the blood of the offering
Where the altar-fires burn low.

[*The* SHADES *listen in amazement:* ALCESTIS *in a doubt, that changes to fear.*

Ho! who is this that cometh,
That feareth not Death?
Over his head he draws
The lion's teeth, and the claws
Are knotted across his breast.
Soft, without sound, he creeps,
Like a beast going down to its rest,
Then swift on the prey he leaps,
Without cry, without breath!
Ye Gods, what sending of Fate
Hath set such task unto mortal?
Lo, Death, and the tusks of hate,
And the shadow of the night-black portal!
Shall sinews avail to escape
Those hands, the holders of doom,
And the pit, and the cavernous gloom
Of the graves which open and gape?
Ah, God, in what shape, in what shape,
Shall life rise up from that tomb
Where a body lies slain? . .

[*The fear of* ALCESTIS *now increases.*

For there, in yon chamber, is laid
A king's and a queen's daughter,
Yea, a mother of kings.
Why shall they wake her again
To the grief and the pain life brings?
Rests she not here in shade
By the side of the soundless water?
O Death, in yon tomb, is thy dead man slain,

Or what captive is bound for the slaughter?

SHADES. Mark ye, mark ye this marvel! Lo, sightless, he sees!
What is this thing thou beholdest? What tidings be these?

TIRESIAS. Look! from the tomb he cometh
He that hath feared not Death!
For now he bears in his hands
A captive, stricken of breath;
And the body of her that died ..
He lifteth, and cherisheth.
Under the rock
By the place of tombs,
In the shade of the cypresses, he stands,
Victor of Death, with the shattered blade
And the bright shorn lock in his hands.

[ALCESTIS *stands stricken with horror.*

ALCESTIS. Ai! Ai!

1ST SHADE. Why dost thou lift that cry
And that face of woe?

ALCESTIS. Ah, me! the foot-track high,
And the road that I have to go!

2ND SHADE. How sayest thou so?
Thou dwellest here with the dead.

ALCESTIS. I tell thee, no!
Yonder I hear the tread
Of swift feet that bring woe!
Aye, now is the will of the God
Made plain from the days of yore:
Yonder I see again
The bright wheels, and the golden car,
When the minstrels and singers drew me,
A maid, from my father's door;
And a bier was my bridal bed that day,

When the Bow and the Quiver made straight the way,
And the hand of Apollo slew me!
For yoked to the shaft came then
The lion, and the fierce black boar,
And they led me forth mid a dance of men,
With minstrels going before.
But here was my doom foretold,
And this shall be cried for a jest,
How to the tomb I was taken in vain;
For the boar, and the lion have drawn me again
From the place of my rest!

[*A pause. The* SHADES *stand gazing at her in amazement and grief.*

1ST SHADE. Was not the God thy friend, who did this thing?

ALCESTIS. No God befriended me: He loved the King,—
The rest he slew.

SHADES. The rest he slew! Woe, woe!

Enter HERMES.

HERMES. Alcestis, Queen of Pherae, learn and know
The Will of Heaven! Thou ('tis ordained) shalt go
Forth from these shades and live again.
This end
Stands wrought by Heracles, thy husband's friend,
To whom Death yields thy fate. The light of God
Shines on thee; reach thy hand, and touch my rod,

And follow me!

1ST SEMI-CHORUS. Thou hearest the word of the God,
What gift he cometh to bring?
Ah, touch not the golden rod,
Nor the snakes that sting!

2ND SEMI-CHORUS. Why should he trouble the dead?
Let the living hear, and obey!
Be blind, ye eyes, and ye ears
Be deaf to what Heaven may say!

SHADE. She is deaf. She is blind. She sees us not, nor hears!

[ALCESTIS *reaches her hand, and touches the rod of* HERMES. *She looks back as she follows him. The* SHADES *watch her go.*

SHADES. Woe, woe! She goeth from us!

TIRESIAS. She shall return!
Not on that soul hath immortality,
Heaven's greater curse, been laid. Look not to learn
More now than lips may tell! The rest shall be.

[*The* SHADES *continue to stand gazing.*

1ST SHADE. I see thee yet!
Hither, with backward look,
To me thou turnest thy face;
And the way whereunto thy feet are set
Seems nothing to thee.

2ND SHADE. But soon to the light of day she shall wake.
And straightway her heart shall forget,
And her soul forsake,
As the God forsook,
These night-bound shades, this place of the dead.

1ST SHADE. I see her yet!

But the look from her eyes hath fled;
For they pierce not the gloom
Of this hollow where darkness lies.

3RD SHADE. Here no suns shall arise,
No sound to quicken the dead.
Ah, when shall word
Again in this place be heard,
For the lifting of those whom her voice comforted?

1ST SHADE. I see her yet!
But dimly; and small and far
Is the back-turned face,
And blind, for no eyes I see.
Yea, the face like a lamp that shone is gone from me;
And there shines in its place, far distant,
The light of a star.

[*As the* SHADES *continue to gaze upward, there dawns from the cleft of the rock a dim vision of the sleeping* PROSERPINE. *She reclines seated, her head bowed, her lap filled with flowers. The radiance of the vision fills the garden. A sleep of enchantment falls upon the* SHADES; *they stand with closed eyes and drooping heads; only the blind* TIRSIAS *remains gazing.*

III

THE DOOM OF ADMETUS

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

ALCESTIS.	ADMETUS.
HER NURSE.	PHERES (*his father*)
HER DAUGHTER.	EUMELOS (*his son*).
HER ATTENDANTS.	HIS ATTENDANT.
CHORUS OF WOMEN.	CHORUS OF MEN.

HYMEN

SCENE.—*A chamber in the house of* ADMETUS, *king of Pherae. Across the centre, backed by pillars, stretches a high screen, with curtained entrances at back to right and left. Before it stands the bridal couch, in front of which is a chair facing the audience. Down stage at centre on a lower level is the domestic altar. By the altar stands* HYMEN, *bearing a torch.*

HYMEN. House of Admetus, whom the Gods befriend,
Peace be within your gates, and joy attend
On this day's bridal! For now Pheres' son,
Helped by the hand of Heracles, hath won
Back from the tomb his wife, who blameless died
That he might live; and, to reclaim his bride,
Comes now where, lo, the nuptial feast is spread.
So shall fruit crown once more the marriage-bed
And to his loins give sons, and thence make strong
The breed of his great race; for whom when song
Was hushed in Heaven, Phoebus, the sun-bright God,
Did shepherd-service, and inglorious trod
These walls within. To him the God then gave
This promise, that he should not see the grave,
If, of freewill, one, offering in his stead,
Rendered the debt. So passed she to the dead,
But comes again upraised. Therefore, 'tis meet
That they which mourned should dance, and

mouths make sweet
Music about this chamber, decked and dight
For fruitful wedlock: where I bring light,
And warmth, and blessing. So may surer bliss,
And through long years, attend the marriage kiss,
Which here now is to be. [*Exit.*

Enter CHORUS *of Women.*

1ST SEMI-CHORUS. As the springs, and the rains, and the rivers
Of hills, that replenish the earth,
Sink and are lost, yet rise and return
To the land of their birth,
And freshen with streams and showers
All herbs and flowers
Which yearn:

2ND SEMI-CHORUS. So thou, O fairest of givers,
Life-bringer, light-bearer to men,
With hands most tender to save
And face by the terrors of death
Unappalled, and by love made brave;

1ST SEMI-CHORUS. And with lips for the spending of breath
More quick than the lips of a runner
Whose feet are set to the goal:

Enter NURSE, *bearing wedding-raiment.*

CHORUS. So thou, our dearest and best,
Art risen again from the grave;
And the land at thy coming is blest.

2ND SEMI-CHORUS. And for thee, befriended of Fate,
My grief and sorrow were vain;

So with joy in my heart I wait
Till eyes behold thee again.

CHORUS LEADER. Nurse of our mistress, wherefore dost thou stand
Silent before us, holding in thy hand
The wedding raiment? Dost thou not hail the day?

[*The* NURSE *lets fall the raiment.*

Oh! What means this?

NURSE. That having naught to say
Of good, I would be mute!

LEADER. From what black bough of evil falls that fruit
Of speech so darkly uttered?

NURSE. Peace, let be!
The Gods drive home their gift. Soon shall ye see
Our mistress come forth to your midst again.

LEADER. Redeemed from death?

NURSE. Yea, for she lies not slain.

LEADER. Thy words sound strange! . . . But living, thou hast said?

NURSE. Aye, surely living, since she is not dead.

LEADER. Speak, Mother: hast thou aught to tell of woe?

NURSE. Ye women, I speak only as I know. . . .
She that was dead now lives; gracious of form,
Gentle of face is she; her hands are warm
To my hands holding them; she feels no pain;
Death on her beauty has not left a stain;
But pure, but perfect, as on the day she died,
So have I found her—lovely as when a bride
First came she to this chamber of our lord.

LEADER. All that thou sayest is good!

NURSE. I speak no word,

Women, but as I know. . . . Ah! God, these eyes
Which knew her as a child! . . . They that be wise,
Dying, let them stay dead! [*Exit* NURSE.

LEADER. O women, all ye that have heard.
What comfort find ye in this word—
'Let the dying stay dead?

CHORUS. Earth is old, Time is long,
And the days that we live are few.
Many arise, and are born,
They mount and wax strong,
Stand thick together like corn;

1ST SEMI-CHORUS. But to them death cometh anew.
They are reaped, and are borne to the grave:
Men know them no more.

2ND SEMI-CHORUS. Yet a gift from the Gods was breath,
Not a curse, O sister, O friend!
For the search of my heart hath shown
How life is sweet to the taste;
And the sorrow that waits in the end
For the feet which haste
Is death!
God gave me a little breath:
Shall I not cleave to it now?

Enter ALCESTIS, *leaning upon the hands of women, and accompanied by her* NURSE. *They seat her upon the throne. She remains there motionless.*

1ST SEMI-CHORUS. And thou, that returnest to earth,
For our lord's delight, and this land's,
Is there no light on thy brow,

No warmth in thy hands,
No gladness of heart, when thou hearest
The voice of our mirth?

2ND SEMI-CHORUS. Lo, robes for the bridal thou wearest,
Though a shroud was thy robe of late;
And home, O Beloved and fairest,
Thou comest, redeemed from Fate.

[*A pause.*

1ST SEMI-CHORUS. Ye say that the world is old:
But spring and the years are young,
And summer to earth gives joy.
Surely to man, not alone
For grief, hath this tale been told,
When the song of the bridal is sung
In the heart of maiden and boy?

NURSE. O women, speak to her! Let living fruit
Be on your tongues! These lips to me are mute
And the eyes know me not!

LEADER. Whence did this come?

NURSE. Death's hold is loosed; but mouth and heart stay dumb.
Lo, from the grave she looks, yet sees not life!

LEADER. What woe thou tellest! Shall not the name of wife or mother move her?

NURSE. She hath heard them all:
And even as wind and water, or the call
Of lowing herds, the murmur of them goes by.

SEMI-CHORUS. I know a valley in the hills
Where echoes in the rocks and rills
Make melody; and there the cry
Of flocks is heard, and clamorous lambs
Bleat and hearken for their dams;
Whom when they hear, from far or nigh,
Swiftly along the meads they leap,

To where the milky udders swell,
And stoop, and thrust, and nuzzling deep
Under the heavy fleeces creep.
Then for them the world is well.

SEMI-CHORUS. I know a pool
Of waters clear and deep,
With wood-boughs overhung
And mosses green:
There in the cool
At noon, when song-birds sleep,
Oft have I seen
The swan amid her young.

LEADER. I know a bed
Fair strewn with linen white,
Where in my sight
One that I loved lay dead.
Her hands and her feet were bound;
With myrtle her head we crowned;
Fair she lay as a bride
And heeded us not.
Her children clung round her and cried;
And her lord, bewailing his lot,
Bowed down at her side:
And we wept, because she had died!

[ALCESTIS *rises to her feet, and stands with half-lifted arms in an attitude of prayer.*

NURSE. Now thou hast touched her! Lo, the unlighted wick
Of life stands there revealed! Go, women, quick!
Bring in the children!

[*Exit one of the attendants. Behind the scenes the children's voices are heard.*

Hark, ah, hark! they cry!
Lady, thy little ones! Oh, Heaven must die
And perish away from earth, if thou stay dumb
Looking on these!

Enter the two CHILDREN.

[*They run to* ALCESTIS *with outsretched arms.*
CHILDREN. Mother!
NURSE. Oh, come, come, come!
Yea, children! 'Tis your own returned again!
CHILDREN. Mother! Oh, mother!
[ALCESTIS *stands as one hearing a far-off cry whose sound she remembers.*
NURSE. Alas! Is that cry vain?
It shall not be! Leap, child, leap to her breast!
Take hold on her with hands, give her no rest,
Cry her to pity!
CHILDREN. Mother!
NURSE. Should this not be
A call to rouse the dead? She wakes! Oh! see!
ALCESTIS. These are my children.
NURSE. By the Gods, 'tis true:
They are thy children, lady!
[ALCESTIS *bends over her daughter with a strange look: she takes the child's hair in her hands on each side lifting it, and begins plaiting it together.*
What wouldst thou do?
Oh, look, look, look!
ALCESTIS. And thou, also, must die
Some day, fair child, and in the grave must lie.
Hark, what I tell thee: do not rise again!
Quiet is that dwelling, and therein is no pain.
NURSE What hast thou said? Is not this world more bright
Than that dim realm where man can see no light,
Nor hear no sound, nor feel no touch of hands?

ALCESTIS. Surely the light goes forth to many lands,,
And seeth all things. Yet our lord, the Sun,
In heaven stands lonely, and is known of none.
NURSE. Nay, was not great Apollo both guard and guide
When to this place thou camest as a bride?
And round thy chariot's yoke such spells were cast
That lion and boar thereto stood harnessed fast.
ALCESTIS. I mind me of it. It was as thou hast said.
Therefore I came; and therefore hence went dead.

[*The* NURSE, *turning away with a gesture of despondency, signs to an attendant to remove the children.*

NURSE. Bear them away! For now I hear the voice
Of singers and of minstrels that rejoice
Because the bridegroom comes. Therefore be swift,
Bring, and put on the wedding robe, and lift
Again to that fair head the bridal crown!
And thou, bright Hera, favourably look down
And bless for us this hour!

[*She kneels at the feet of* ACLESTIS

Oh mistress mine,
Surely thou knowest my heart was ever thine,
To do thee service for better and not for worse!
ALCESTIS. Yea, yea, I know it! And yet thou wast my nurse!

[*Stifling a sharp cry, the* NURSE *rises and moves away.* ALCESTIS, *robed and crowned, stands alone. The sound of music and*

singing draws nearer. A look of frozen horror comes over her.

NURSE. Come, then! for it is time: give me thy hand!
And if the Gods are gracious to this land,
Let them work wonders now!

[*Exit* NURSE, *leading* ALCESTIS, *followed by the attendant women.*

CHORUS. And turning my heart from sadness
I shall have done with fear,
When the sound of a people's gladness
Grows loud in mine ear.

[*The women's* CHORUS *goes out. Enter the men's* CHORUS.

1ST SEMI-CHORUS. Happy is he who knoweth
The hour when his soul is blest,
Who seeth the gods in power,
And their ways made manifest;
Ready of foot he goeth
To the goal which giveth him rest.

2ND SEMI-CHORUS. So shall the breed of his race
Be as shafts in the hand of a giant;
Happy is he, and immortal,
Whose quiver is filled with their breath:
He, unashamed of face,
Stands to the foeman defiant,
Comes undismayed to the portal
Dark with the shadow of death.

Enter ADMETUS *attended.*

CHORUS. Therefore with crowned brows,
Thou comest rejoicing, O King,
For the Gods have wrought to thy house
A marvellous thing.

[ADMETUS *stands before the altar, and offers incense.*

ADMETUS. First unto thee, Apollo, thanks and praise
I render, who hast given me length of days,
And life to hold, and joy, that yet on earth
Mine eyes see light, which in all hearts makes mirth. [*He offers the incense.*
And thou, Persephone, and thou, great Head,
Holy and high, upraised amid the dead,
Lord of the Dark, to whom all flesh must bow
When Fate decrees, glad thanks I render now
For my release, and hers. To thee this debt
Freely I own.

[*Averting his face from the altar, he offers the incense.*

And thou great Hera, who of the highest throne
Hast share in Heaven, on this once widowed bed
Look down with shining eyes, and round it shed
Sweet influences, and let the fruitful womb
Ripen with sons and daughters.

[*He offers the incense.*

So shall no doom
Sap out the strength and standing of my race,
Nor my name be forgotten in this place,
Where I am King.

[ADMETUS *turns from the altar.*

ATTENDANT. My Lord, here comes thy father!

ADMETUS. Let him go!
I need him not. He lived to be my foe.
Rich with the gift of years, he paid no heed—
Hugging his withered life—to my fresh need.

Enter PHERES.

PHERES. My son, because this day blessing shines bright
On thee and thine, and to this home gives light
In place of darkness, therefore am I come
To wish thee joy. For when I saw the sum
Of thine affliction, straightway I did repent
The wrath I had against thee: yea, and sent
To tell thee so. Hast thou no word of peace
To offer in return?

ADMETUS. Yea; henceforth cease
To trouble thyself with me, or aught that's mine!

PHERES. Hard words: but harder that proud heart of thine.

ADMETUS. Hard was its need, when sharp tongue bit like steel!

PHERES. Yet, when the wound is salved, the flesh will heal.

ADMETUS. , Thou, living, art the wound from which I shrink!

PHERES. Hadst thou thyself no stomach, but I must drink
This cup for thee?

ADMETUS. What use to thee was life,
Being old?

PHERES. I loved it, better than thou thy wife!
Therefore she died for thee!

ADMETUS. Death, is thy sting
In this old serpent's tail, that he must fling
His tainted carcase across my path this day?

PHERES. Pass! For no longer will I bar thy way
To bliss. Go, dull thy conscience with fresh lust;
Embrace the body which thou didst cast to dust:
Feast on the flesh again, thou carrion fly!

[ADMETUS *advances threateningly towards him.*

ATTENDANT [*intervening*]. My Lord!

ADMETUS. Ye Gods! let him make haste to die,
For while he lives corruption taints this earth!

PHERES. My years are with me; and I know their worth
Better than thou knowest thine.

[*Exit* PHERES.

ATTENDANT. Now is my lord
Ready? It is the hour.

ADMETUS. Yea, let the word
Be given. Call in the women!

[*The* MINSTRELS *clash their cymbals.*

ATTENDANT. Yonder, they come.

[*Two attendants enter with torches; they draw back the curtains from the doors, and stand to right and left of the bed. Enter the* NURSE *from doorway to right, carrying a cup. Then from the left comes in the bridal procession. In rigid silence the women walk two and two, dropping sprays of myrtle from folded napkins which they carry between them. The movement is sad and full of solemnity, sacrificial in character. They pass from left to right across the stage, descend and pass out.* ALCESTIS, *veiled, comes last, supported by two women; as she halts at left-centre they fall back, leaving her alone.*

ADMETUS. Therefore bid all go forth! Close and make dumb
These doors.

LEADER. And may the eyes of Heaven look down,
And bless this bridal! Hail to thee, thou crown
Of womanhood. Honour is thine this day,
And fame for ever!

[*The men's* CHORUS *lift their hands in salutation to* ALCESTIS *as they pass out.*

[*The* NURSE *brings the cup to* ADMETUS*: he takes it and drinks. She brings the cup to* ALCESTIS. *The two attendants lift up and lay back her veil. The* NURSE *offers the cup: her hands do not take hold; with shut eyes she drinks. The* NURSE *goes out, followed by the two attendants, who draw the curtains after them.*

ADMETUS. Blessing and peace be thine, O form which died,
And com'st more fair to be my second bride!
For now thou shinest upon me like a star!

ALCESTIS. I give thee greeting, having journeyed far.

ADMETUS. Mine, or was thine the journey, wouldst thou say?

ALCESTIS. We have both journeyed; mine was the longer way.

ADMETUS. Bitter it was for thee to part from breath!

ALCESTIS. Life filled mine eyes; I had not looked on death.

ADMETUS. What hast thou now of hidden things to tell?

ALCESTIS. Man knows not life till he know death as well.

ADMETUS. Learns he from death more than from Heaven above?

ALCESTIS. Yea: more of God himself, and life, and love.

ADMETUS. Where foundest thou—love?

ALCESTIS. Not where the dead lie bound,
Nor here on earth, one lover have I found.

ADMETUS. No lover, dost thou say? Now, by this head,
I am thy soul's true lover.

ALCESTIS. Thou hast said.

ADMETUS. Did I not choose thee before all on earth?

ALCESTIS. The doom of God lay on me from my birth.

ADMETUS. Sweet was our bridal-chamber filled by thee!

ALCESTIS. The night was dark; I had not eyes to see.

ADMETUS. Reaching my arms I caught thee back from Fate.

ALCESTIS. In each small life the little need seems great.

ADMETUS. Hadst thou no longing, then, to live again?

ALCESTIS. And not to die: therewith I strove in vain.

ADMETUS. But having died, was there no looking back?

ALCESTIS. I looked, and lo, the doors of life were black.

ADMETUS. Didst thou not love the children of thy womb?

ALCESTIS. They still were mine when I was in the tomb.

ADMETUS. Home hungered for thee, and the marriage-bed,
Where thou wast fruitful.

ALCESTIS. And where I lay dead.
Having borne all!
ADMETUS. What means that stricken cry?
Foundst thou no bliss?
ALCESTIS. Yea, bliss enough to die
When thou didst ask it of me, O my lord!
Oft times he might have slain me with his sword:
Yet was I spared to die another death.
ADMETUS. Breathe not upon the past such bitter breath!
Surely thou knowest, great was my need of thee!
ALCESTIS. A greater need befell: I set thee free.
ADMETUS. Was it not love which took thee to the tomb?
ALCESTIS. Thrice thou hadst planted life within my womb.
ADMETUS. Yea, thou hast borne me sons which shall be men.
ALCESTIS. And thrice I could have died; but did not then.
ADMETUS. What darker word is this that thou wouldst say?
ADCESTIS. Lo, at thy bidding, I have looked on day,
Life, death and darkness. So thy hand held all.
ADMETUS. Therefore shall hold thee still: yea, I will call
Joy back to thee again!
ALCESTIS. My joy I gave
Before I died: nor took it to the grave:
Nor brought it thence.
ADMETUS. Say, then, where dwells it now?
ALCESTIS. In thee, if thou be joyful; but if thou
Hast not found joy, then was all given in vain.

ADMETUS. Soon from thy body joy shall spring again,
Breeding fresh life.
ALCESTIS. So Earth must give her yield
Unto the hand of him who ploughs the field.
ADMETUS. And reaps the fruitful sheaves! [*He clasps her in his arms.*] Come, quick Desire,
Kindle within this heart its wonted fire!
ALCESTIS. My flesh is thine: the life therein, my own.
ADMETUS. To me, thy lover, turn not this heart of stone!
Greater my love for thee than e'er before!
ALCESTIS. As it is greater dost thou ask for more?
ADMETUS. Yea, for I thirst! Let the Gods give thee bliss!
ALCESTIS. What God in Heaven or hell shall grant me this?
ADMETUS. Ask of Apollo; he hath made thee mine!
ALCESTIS. Of that vine-treading thou hast drunk the wine.
ADMETUS. Give me to drink again. That cup recall!
ALCESTIS. Again thou askest of me—and I give all!
[*Life goes out of her. She falls back in his arms.*
ADMETUS. Now art thou mine! O bride of every sense. . . .
Ah, what cold horror's this? Breath has gone hence,
Warmth, touch, sight, hearing! Help! Lo, unto earth,
Where God sent blessing, a curse hath sprung to birth!
Apollo, thy dart hath slain me!

Enter NURSE.

NURSE. What means that cry!
ADMETUS. She is dead! She is dead! Clasping, I felt her die!
NURSE. Oh, woe is me, my mistress! Oh, my lord!
ADMETUS. Yea, deep into my breast she thrust a sword,
So much she hated me!
NURSE. Oh woe, woe, woe!
ADMETUS. Death won her love, and Life became her foe! [*He covers his face with his robe.*
NURSE. O child, is it I that have slain thee?
For surely thy heart I read,
And saw how thy face was set.
But mine were the hands to chain thee
To the life that thou wouldst forget
And to bring thee back from the dead.

[*While she is speaking, others enter; the women's* CHORUS, *the attendants, and children. They stand awe-struck, looking on.*

NURSE. I knew thy heart,
Patient and tender; no grief
Failed ever to touch thee; no smart,
But with thee found relief.
But thou hadst a grief unknown:
Silently, down to the grave, thou hast borne it alone.
ADMETUS. Lift up your voices and cry! O women, shall she not wake?
CHORUS. Wake, Mistress, awake!
ADMETUS. She lived, she rose, she returned from

the dead, having died for my sake!
CHORUS. For his sake! For our sake!
ADMETUS. Earth had not stained her: her body was sweet, and her form
Was fair to the eyes!
CHORUS. Oh, the eyes, the eyes!
ADMETUS. She lay on my breast, she was warm
To my touch, and the prize
Was mine!
CHORUS. The prize—ah, the prize!
ADMETUS. Oh, God, have the years to give
Naught but this double death
Of the lips that did once so live,
And were twice so parted from breath?
CHORUS. Oh, Lady, awake!—return! Put off this showing
Of death! Repent of thy going!
Oh, mother return!

Enter PHERES.

PHERES. Fools! Why do ye call on the dead
Who hear not? Never again
Shall voices burden that ear.
Death untasted is feared,—but tasted is sweet;
And the heart where that honey hath lain
Feels hunger no more.
Yea, cover the feet that walk not:
Yea, cover the eyes!
Night for me is not yet; but there like a lover he lies
Look, there is peace in that breast,
And her face is a star.
Old of foot to the grave without rest

I go: but the journey is far.

[*Exit* PHERES.

ADMETUS. In the heart that my heart would cherish
The gift of the Gods wrought scorn.
She is gone from me. Let the day perish
Wherein I was born!

CHORUS. Death comes early or late;
And surely the dead are blest.
But I must carry the weight
Of my years to a far-off grave,—
Lying I know not where.
Yonder, to cover mine eyes,
Grass grows, and the green leaves wave;
And the gold of the sun lies there,
All bright and at rest.

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